

# Cultural Similarities and Differences of Social Comparison on Instagram

## Research Thesis

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## **Abstract**

Instagram is a photo-sharing application that has gained great popularity among young adults. Its affordances of visibility and connectivity can simulate social comparison behaviors and thus influence its users. Using in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis, the current study sought to investigate cultural similarities and differences of social comparison on Instagram and identify possible factors that shape people's comparison behaviors. Responses showed that during social comparison, (a) American participants were mainly motivated by the needs of strengthening connections and enhancing self-images while Chinese participants were motivated by the desires of self-evaluation and following popular trends. (b) American participants tended to engage in similar comparison with close friends and downward comparison with acquaintances. Chinese participants were likely to do similar comparison with close friends but upward comparison with acquaintances and Instagram influencers. (c) After comparing with others, American participants experienced self-adjustment and self-enhancement. Chinese participants engaged in self-adjustment but self-improvement.

## **Introduction**

As the popularity of photo-sharing applications has rapidly increased over the past few years, the effects of their use have been widespread concerned and studied. However, previous research yielded mixed results. Some studies found that photo-sharing applications might increase their users' happiness and life satisfaction (Pittman & Reich, 2016) while others showed that photo-sharing applications might lead to depressive symptoms (Lup, Trub, & Rosenthal, 2015). Most of the previous studies were mainly based on quantitative research with limited narratives and paid relative less attention to possible cultural factors in photo-sharing application use. A study adopting in-depth interviews that focus on participants' thoughts and experiences and addressing user experiences of participants from different cultures is imperative to understand the impacts of photo-sharing applications.

## **Literature Review**

### **Photo-Sharing Application: Instagram**

Instagram is an image-based social media that allows users to edit and share pictures and videos on the service. Launched in October 2010, Instagram attracted 600 million users worldwide (Instagram, 2016). Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan (2016) found that 32 percent of Internet users (28 percent of all U.S. adults) used Instagram, which made it the most popular photo-sharing application. Instagram use was especially high among younger adults. 59 percent online adults aging 18-29 used Instagram. As a photo-sharing application that is gaining great popularity among young adults in recent years, Instagram serves certain similar characteristics to Facebook while emphasizing on visualization. It prioritizes photos and videos over texts. People are prompted to upload a photo or video first when writing a post. Instagram provides editing tools (e.g., *Effects* and *Filters*) and promotes high-quality pictures sharing (Instagram, 2017).

This feature might magnify the social media use problems of presenting only positive and polished aspects of one's life and judging other people based on pictures easily recalled (Chou & Edge, 2012). Like Facebook, Instagram also facilitates online social interaction. Within public Instagram profiles, users can "follow", "like" and comment on photos of others. They can tag and mention their friends on a picture so that picture will be also available on their friends' profiles. Moreover, Instagram enables adding activity, hashtags and locations to photos, allowing all photos with that label to be searchable. By analyzing its users' interests and online interaction, Instagram automatically suggests friends and pictures to its users. Those features encourage users to view and follow strangers. The Instagram relationship may not be reciprocal as following someone on Instagram may only go in one direction (Lup et al., 2015). This relationship can facilitate passive users who would experience more negative outcomes (Lim & Yang, 2015). Journalists argued that Instagram was a purer version of Facebook regarding the aspects of photographs, "likes" and comments and its image-driven nature provoked more immediate social comparison (Winter, 2013).

At this time, however, limited research has delved into Instagram. Previous studies examined the Instagram photo content, motivations for Instagram use and the effects of Instagram use. Selfie, friends, food, gadget, captioned photo, activity, pet and fashion were eight categories of Instagram images (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014). Sheldon and Bryant (2016) identified surveillance (knowledge about others), documentations, coolness and creativity as main motivations for Instagram use. Pittman and Reich (2016) argued that Instagram use might reduce loneliness and elevate happiness and life satisfaction. However, other research showed a positive association between Instagram use and depressive symptom. Findings

suggested that social comparison might mediate the association of Instagram use and its impacts (Lup et al., 2015).

### **Social Comparison Theory**

People judge their opinions and abilities by comparing with others, especially when there exists no physical base for evaluation (Festinger, 1954). Such comparison can take place between any two individuals, but people do not tend to compare with others who are too divergent from themselves. Instead, they almost always select someone who is similar in opinions and abilities (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Wood (1989) extended the Festinger's social comparison theory by arguing that an individual is not always a rational and unbiased self-evaluator. Depending on the context of the comparison, people may engage in three types of appraisals: self-evaluation, self-improvement and self-enhancement. In self-evaluation, individuals endeavor to be accurate in their views of the world. They select information equally even when the consequence is likely to be unfavorable. However, in self-improvement, people are driven by the interest of improving their knowledge and skills. They make upward comparison, in which they compare with someone successful to improve their abilities in a given domain (Wheeler, 1966; Taylor, Neter, & Wayment, 1995). Besides, in self-enhancement, individuals do not recognize all comparative information but process biased information in a self-serving manner. By comparing with someone unsuccessful, people engage in a downward comparison to enhance self-esteem and subjective well-being (Wills, 1981; Tesser, 1988).

Wheeler and Miyake (1992) investigated 94 college students on their self-recorded daily social comparisons over two weeks. The study showed that people tended to make a comparison under the situations of social interaction and visual (no contact). More comparisons were made

with close friends than with ordinary friends and acquaintances or strangers. Very few people compared with famous persons (movie stars, singers, etc.). People tended to make similar comparisons with close friends and downward comparisons with ordinary friends. There were more lifestyle (personality, lifestyle, and academic matters) comparisons than assets (ability, appearance, and social skills) comparisons. People felt significantly better after downward comparisons and significantly worse after upward comparisons. However, overall they felt somewhat better after a similar comparison.

Social comparison behaviors were prevalent among college students (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992), and the rise of social media has created new channels for such comparison. Social media is an online platform that enables people to create public profile and share information with others. It allows users to observe other people's lives in a way that they would normally not be able to do, and thus become an ideal environment for social comparison (Gerson, Plagnol & Corr, 2016). Lim and Yang (2015) identified three characteristics of social media that might stimulate social comparison: positive self-presentation, heuristic judgment and passive usage. Previous studies concerning social media and social comparison behavior mainly focused on Facebook. Research showed a positive relationship between Facebook use intensity and social comparison frequency (Lee, 2014). Scholars investigated the effects of social comparison on Facebook and identified possible moderators. Facebook social comparison was found positively associated with negative feelings, such as jealousy and anxiety (Lee, 2014; Fox & Moreland, 2015; Lim & Yang, 2015), poorer self-perception (Vogel, Rose, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015; de Vries & Kühne, 2015) and lower subjective well-being (Gerson et al., 2016). Factors that might moderate the association included the affordances of Facebook (Fox & Moreland, 2015), personality traits

(Lee, 2014; Gerson et al., 2016), the role of tie strength (Lin & Utz, 2015) and the happiness of an individual (de Vries & Kühne, 2015).

Previous research regarding social comparison on Instagram was mainly quantitative studies with limited knowledge about the social comparison mechanism. To gain insights into people's social comparison on Instagram and how Instagram influences its users' behaviors and well-being, I adopted in-depth interviews and posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What motivates people to compare with others on Instagram?

RQ2: How do people compare with others on Instagram?

RQ3: What are the consequences of engaging in social comparison on Instagram?

### **Cultural Differences in Social Comparison Choices**

People from different cultures are different in views of the self, others, and the interdependence of the two (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Based on different construals, Markus and Kitayama (1991) classified people as independent construal of the self (individualist) and interdependent construal of the self (collectivist). People who are highly individualistic pursue independence by expressing unique inner attributes while people high in collectivism prefer to cooperate with others and build interdependent relationships (Chung & Mallery, 1999). Such construal can influence the essence of individual experience (Geertz, 1975; Gergen, 1968; Holland & Quinn, 1987) and people's perspective on social relationships (Triandis, 1989).

Markus and Kitayama (1991) argued that these divergent self-construals affect cognition, emotion and motivation. The independent self organizes one's own behavior not by reference to other people but internal thoughts, feelings and actions. Others are sources to verify and affirm

the internal attributes. For the independent self, others are less centrally involved in one's current self-definition or identity but are critical for social comparison (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The independent self tends to be motivated to behaviors that afford self-expression of identity and inner attributes (Markus & Wurf, 1987). As with an interdependent self, other people become an integral part of the context of connection, installation, and assimilation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The interdependent self seeks self-definition through relationships with others in specific contexts and is likely to be motivated to actions that promote one's relationship to others (Markus & Wurf, 1987). These self-construal divergences indicate cultural differences in social comparison behaviors.

Generally, individuals in Western cultures hold independent views while individuals in Eastern or Asian cultures hold interdependent perspectives (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990; Triandis, 1989). Previous studies in social comparison were primarily conducted in individualistic cultures and paid relative less attention to cultural differences. Chung and Mallery (1999) surveyed 78 students from the United States and 157 students from China. They found that collectivism was positively related to a desire to compare in general, to make upward comparison and was negatively associated with downward comparison choices. People made social comparison for the purpose of self-depreciation, especially in collectivist cultures (Takata, 1987). Chung and Mallery's study showed cultural differences in social comparison tendencies but did not dig into the motivations, processes and consequences of social comparison behaviors. Thus, in the context of social comparison on Instagram, this research incorporated cultural perspectives. Because the United States is generally considered the representative of individualistic culture while China is deeply influenced by collectivism, this research studied individuals from the United States and China.



Instagram achieved global popularity among young adults. Even if it has been reported blocked in mainland China by the Great Firewall since September 2014 (Riley, 2014), it attracts a large population of Chinese users who live overseas. To explore cultural similarities and differences during social comparison on Instagram, interviews were conducted among American students and Chinese international students.

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

The University IRB approved all procedures of this project. Young adults were recruited from a Midwestern university in the United States through emails, flyers and posts shared on Facebook, Instagram and WeChat. In order to enroll, the participant must be an American student or a Chinese international student actively using Instagram. Those who qualify for the study scheduled and attended the interview at their convenience of signing up. The interviews were 30 – 50 minutes and were held on campus and audio-recorded. Every participant in this study was asked a set of pre-determined questions regarding the motivations, processes and consequences of social comparison behaviors on Instagram. Participants ( $N = 14$ ) were 7 American students (female  $n = 4$ ; male  $n = 3$ ) and 7 Chinese international students (female  $n = 4$ ; male  $n = 3$ ) between the ages of 19 and 22. All interviews were conducted in English for American students as well as Chinese international students.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Participants were assigned non-identifying code names for the purpose of maintaining the confidentiality of their responses. American students were named A1 – A7 and Chinese international students were named C1 – C7. The qualitative data was analyzed by a constant-

comparative method (Glaser, 1965). The constant comparative method is commonly used in qualitative research and can be applied to social units of any size (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Newly collected data is compared with previous data to identify patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon. The qualitative data analysis is not intended to create broad generalizations but to identify, elaborate and clarify recurring themes that were expressed across the responses of participants. Responses from American students and Chinese international students were categorized separately according to the motivations, processes and consequences of social comparison behaviors on Instagram as described by participants. Representative anecdotes from participants were cited to provide a thick description (Ryle, 1984). By using thick description, a phenomenon can be described in sufficient details so a human behavior can be explained with its context. This method is adopted to explain patterns of social relationships and achieve external validity (Holloway, 1997).

## **Result**

### **Motivations (Americans): Strengthening Connections and Enhancing Self-Images (RQ1)**

Responses showed that American participants were mainly motivated by the needs of strengthening connections and enhancing self-images as presented on Instagram. American participants indicated that they used Instagram to maintain constant interactions with their friends. They thought such comparison made their relationship “get closer than the past” (A6, male, 19). By comparing the types of pictures posted, participants remained aware of their friends’ most recent interests and thoughts. For example, A2 (female, 21) explained, “Even for close friends, we’re not together all the time but I’d like to know what they are into. Comparing what we post so we know what happened to us, what we hate and what we like. That’s how we start conversations.”

Besides strengthening connections, American participants reported to compare with others with the needs of enhancing self-images as presented on Instagram. American participants indicated that they wanted to show their positive sides to others on Instagram and to be “better than them” (A5, female, 22). A7 (male, 19) said, “For people I don’t know very well, I’ll look at what they posted and I know they do so too. My Instagram shows what kind of person I am. I’ll carefully choose the types of pictures to post.”

### **Motivations (Chinese): Self-evaluation and Following Popular Trends (RQ1)**

Chinese international students reported to engage in social comparison on Instagram with the motivations of self-evaluation and following popular trends. Three dimensions of self-evaluation were identified from their responses: likeability, life status and popularity. Chinese participants compared with others about the types of pictures posted with the desire of being liked by other people. After comparing, they changed their posting behaviors accordingly to “fit in” (C7, male, 19). Besides, they used other people as a standard. By comparing with others, they evaluated their life status and how popular they were among their friends on Instagram.

In addition, Chinese participants were motivated by the desire of following popular trends. When comparing with others, Chinese participants scrutinized the pictures posted by others and tried to learn from them in terms of how to compose intriguing photos, where to go and what to buy. They compared with others regarding attractive pictures and creative ideas so they can post similar pictures and follow popular trends.

### **Processes (Americans): Similar Comparison with Close friends and Downward Comparison with Acquaintances (RQ2)**

American participants tended to engage in similar comparison with close friends and downward comparison with acquaintances. Responses showed that American participants saw

similarities rather than differences when comparing with close friends. They did similar comparison with close friends regarding the types of pictures they posted and the number of “likes” they got. Responses indicated that such comparison was generally motivated by the desire of strengthening connections. When comparing the number of “likes” with close friends, participants felt amused rather than jealous or upset. A1 (female, 20) informed:

I always compare the number of “likes” with my best friend. She and I, we usually right on the same though. We have pretty much the same audience because we’ve been friends for so many years and we know the same people... I won’t feel jealous or upset. It’s just for the fun of it. For me and her just to see, like “oh how are we doing?”

When comparing with acquaintances, American participants were likely to engage in downward comparison, in which they compared with someone who seemed less proficient than they were. When they compared the types of pictures posted with acquaintances, they highlighted their positive sides, strengthened their self-images and criticized other people. Several situations were described by participants: “I usually only post special events or milestones of myself but they [acquaintances on Instagram] post all selfies or similar pictures multiple times a day” (A1, female, 20); “I always want to look positive on Instagram but some people, they just complain and complain” (A5, female, 22); “I hated when I saw someone post opinions about politics or religion. I never do that because someone who doesn’t know me well might judge me and misunderstand me” (A3, female, 22).

Participants usually don’t compare the number of “likes” with an acquaintance because they “don’t know that person very well in real life” and have “different audience”. They were

“kind of indifferent about that” as they become “mature Instagram users” (A2, female, 21). For example, A1 (female, 20) said, “I went to a small high school but I know some people, they went to bigger high schools so they know more people and get more ‘likes’. I don’t compare ‘likes’ with them.” However, participants did reveal that there was a transition process. A5 (female, 22) explained:

I cared about it [the number of “likes”] when I first started to use Instagram in high school, but now I focus more on myself. Sometimes I’m like, oh I wish I had that many “likes”, Maybe I will care for 2 seconds, but after that I’m like, oh wait I have a lot of awesome real friends... I’m friend with a bunch of high schoolers. For them, Instagram is a big thing. So they get like 300 “likes” on Instagram when I get like 30 or 40, but I don’t care that much. For them, if they don’t get like 30 “likes” in 30 minutes they will delete the picture. That’s crazy.

### **Processes (Chinese): Similar Comparison with Close friends and Upward Comparison with Acquaintances and Instagram Influencers (RQ2)**

Like American participants, Chinese participants also engaged in similar comparison with close friends, but they did upward comparison with acquaintances and Instagram influencers. They compared with their close friends regarding the types of pictures posted and the life status as represented on Instagram. They tried to post pictures similar to their close friends’ so their friends would like them. They compared with their close friends about big events posted on Instagram so they can evaluate their life status. C2 (female, 21) said,

I'm always happy when I saw my friends post their academic or career achievement because I know someone like me can achieve that. It makes me think [that] maybe I can do that too.

However, when comparing with acquaintances, Chinese participants generally engaged in upward comparison. Participants specified an acquaintance as a person who was popular in school. They knew that person slightly or heard about that person from their friends, but that person might or might not know them. C3 (female, 21) explained,

I know her because she knows everybody. You know, Instagram suggests friends to you based on mutual friends. I saw her name on my profile. Also, my friends "liked" her pictures. Her pictures always showed on my feed. So, I viewed and added her.

Participants compared their lives with acquaintances' lives as reflected on Instagram and the number of "likes" they got because "those people provide a standard" (C3, female, 21). C3 explained, "By comparing with their lives and how many 'likes' they got, I could know my life status and how popular I am".

In addition, participants did upward comparison with Instagram influencers. When comparing with Instagram influencers, such as fashion bloggers, photographers and comedians, Chinese participants tended to look up to and admire their pictures and lifestyles. Participants compared with them to follow popular trends. C5 (male, 21) said:

When I make travel plans, I always look up some bloggers and photographers to see where they have been to. I compared with them and decided where to go. I also copied some of their photo styles. I mean, they are experts. They certainly know better than me. I don't feel bad about that. Like, for travel pictures, I used to have just me and the beach but now I learned to add some frames and chose different shooting angles.

### **Consequences (Americans): Self-Adjustment and Self-Enhancement (RQ3)**

After similar comparison with close friends, American participants adjusted their behaviors of posting pictures and interacting with their friends on Instagram. After downward comparison with acquaintances, they enhanced their self-images and derogated the person being compared with. Participants were inspired by some of their close friends' pictures and tended to post similar types of pictures but generally they were not influenced by any specific action. For example, A4 (male, 21) said:

[My close friends] they posted a lot of travel pictures. It makes me want to post travel pictures when I go somewhere but that doesn't really motivate me to go out or go to certain places. Like, I'm not a fan of beach but I will post pictures when I go hiking or camping.

Some participants felt stressful when comparing the number of "likes" with their close friends. They adjusted the way they interacted with their friends after such comparison. They felt obligated to "like" every picture of their close friends in order to "maintain the balance" (A2, female, 21). They tended to post the same group pictures together with their close friends. A2

(female, 21) divulged, “Every time we get together, we take group pictures and post the one everybody agrees on, so nobody will be upset”. Some participants also tended to post the pictures that their close friends might like. A4 (male, 21) reported:

I usually don’t post selfies or meaningless pictures because nobody cares. I prefer to post pictures with people or of events that are related to my friends. Like, last time, I went back to my high school and posted a picture with my high school teachers. It got lots of “likes”.

After downward comparison with acquaintances, American participants generally felt that they were “more interesting” (A1, female, 20) and “more unique” (A2, female, 21) than those acquaintances. American participants ignored or unfollowed some of the acquaintances. They tended to delete and avoid posting certain types of pictures that they found annoyed when they saw from other people. Besides, participants were likely to post pictures that highlight their lives and express their uniqueness.

### **Consequences (Chinese): Self-Adjustment and Self-Improvement (RQ3)**

Chinese participants also adjusted their posting behaviors after similar comparison with their close friends. They sometimes criticized themselves after such comparison but generally tended to seek advice and improve themselves. They experienced negative feelings after upward comparison with acquaintances but were apt to improve themselves after upward comparison with Instagram influencers. After comparing with close friends on Instagram, Chinese participants were likely to post pictures similar to their friends’ and delete certain pictures. They



did not feel they were “forced to do” so but thought their friends might like certain types of pictures so they “wanted to do” (A7, male, 19). C6 (female, 21) described:

I used to post pictures, like a screenshot of funny text message conversation or a lab report I spent a lot of time to do. Then I found my friends post more pictures like food, travel or some creative stuff. They were pretty and interesting. I don’t want to be a boring person so now I posted less of them [e.g., screenshot, lab report] and posted similar pictures [e.g., food, travel] my friends might like.

Participants reported that they were always motivated by their close friends, but sometimes felt stressful when they saw their close friends’ pictures about academic or career achievement. After comparing life status, some of them felt “stressful” and criticized themselves (C7, male, 19), but generally they tended to “work harder” (C5, male, 21) and ask advice from their friends. C2 (female, 21) said, “When I saw my friends post their academic or career achievement, usually I’ll contact them and ask advice about, like graduation and future plan.”

Participants reported that they felt “jealous”, “inferior”, and “depressed” after upward comparison with acquaintances on Instagram because “their lives are more interesting and they get more ‘likes’” (C1, female, 21; C5, male, 21; C7, male, 19). Participants were less likely to interact with those people in real life after comparison but became “Instagram friends” with them. For example, C1 (female, 21) said:

[After comparing with acquaintances on Instagram] I'm kind of hesitating to talk to them because they are way too social for me. Sometimes I feel we're not in the same world. But I'll nicely "like" their pictures so they will "like" me back.

After upward comparison with Instagram influencers, participants improved their skills, followed popular trends and sought advice. For example, C2 (female, 21) compared with fashion bloggers and followed their dressing ideas and makeup styles. She bought stuff as recommended by fashion bloggers and searched for similar items as used by them.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Findings**

Responses showed cultural similarities and differences of social comparison behaviors on Instagram regarding the motivations, processes and consequences: (a) American participants were mainly motivated by the needs of strengthening connections and enhancing self-images while Chinese participants were motivated by the desires of self-evaluation and following popular trends. (b) American participants tended to engage in similar comparison with close friends and downward comparison with acquaintances. Chinese participants were likely to do similar comparison with close friends but upward comparison with acquaintances and Instagram influencers. (c) After comparing with others, American participants experienced self-adjustment and self-enhancement. Chinese participants engaged in self-adjustment but self-improvement.

### **Implications**

This study was not intended to create broad generalizations but to help identify possible factors that shape people's social comparison behaviors on Instagram. Building on social

comparison theory (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989), the findings extended the literature on understanding cultural similarities and differences of social comparison behaviors on Instagram.

Previous studies claimed that upward comparison generally led to negative feelings. However, responses from Chinese participants indicated that even though they felt inferior, jealous and depressed when comparing with acquaintances who were popular in school, they felt inspired and appreciative when comparing with Instagram influencers. This inconsistency might be explained by the role of tie strength (Petróczi, Nepusz, & Bazsó, 2007). Chinese participants perceived acquaintances as competitors but Instagram influencers as advice givers and supporters. So, they engaged in two different types of upward comparison behaviors that extracted different feelings. This finding indicates that further research of social comparison on Instagram needs to investigate how people perceive and define tie strength on Instagram. Future studies of social comparison on Instagram should include the factor of tie strength.

Several findings supported previous studies on social comparison theory. First, when choosing the person of comparison, both American participants and Chinese participants engaged in similar comparison with their close friends. Neither American participants nor Chinese participants compared with individuals who were too different from themselves, such as movie stars and singers. Cultural similarities were perceived regarding selecting the person being compared with. Second, participants had tendency of engaging in upward comparison for self-improvement and downward comparison for self-enhancement. However, there were cultural differences of comparison tendency. American participants reported that they engaged in downward comparison with acquaintances to enhance their self-images and highlight their positive sides while Chinese participants upward compared with Instagram influencers to improve their skills. This finding is consistent with Chung and Mallery's research (1999) that

people from collectivistic culture were more likely to make upward comparison while people from individualistic culture tended to make downward comparison.

Other significant cultural differences of social comparison on Instagram were showed in this study. Marcus (2015) stated that people compared with others on Instagram for self-promotion rather than to maintain social relationships. Responses from American participants did show a tendency of self-promotion but responses from Chinese participants showed that they focused more on social relationship when comparing with others on Instagram. There were possible cultural differences, as people from collectivistic culture were inclined to build interdependent relationships while people from individualistic culture preferred to express uniqueness (Chung & Mallery, 1999). When comparing with others on Instagram, Collectivist might engage in relationship building while individualist might focus more on self-promotion.

Besides, Chinese participants compared their lives with others' lives as reflected on Instagram but American participants rarely did so. After comparison on Instagram, Chinese participants were likely to be influenced by others' behaviors, such as going to the same tourist attractions and following dressing styles. However, that influence barely showed from American participants' responses. American participants might post similar types of pictures after comparing with friends but generally will not follow the same behavior. For example, they might be motivated to post travel pictures but won't go to the same place. Those differences might be explained by Markus and Kitayama's theory (1991) that the interdependent self considers others as a context to assimilate with while the independent self organizes behaviors by consulting inner thoughts. During social comparison on Instagram, people from collectivistic culture might be more affected by others' behaviors than people from individualist culture.

Moreover, responses from Chinese participants and American participants showed differences in dealing with cognitive dissonance that stems from social comparison. According to the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), people experienced mental discomfort when confronting new information that contradicts existing beliefs, ideas and values. When comparing with others, people might see differences between themselves and other people. Results showed that American participants ignored and denied dissonance by unfollowing certain individuals and criticizing them. However, Chinese participants tended to criticize themselves and experienced negative feelings. Markus and Kitayama (1991) stated that Westerners tended to avoid cognitive dissonance and reduce them by derogating the person being compared with. Easterners were apt to blame themselves. Those differences might lead to different consequences for the interdependent self and the independent self.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study has several limitations. For Chinese international students, the question of how long the participant has been staying in the United States was not discussed in the interviews. It is possible that the length of time living the United States affected a person's cultural identity and personal experience. Chinese international students might assimilate themselves to American culture and become more independent after long staying. Future studies need to address this problem. Besides, the interviews were based on a relatively small sample (7 American participants and 7 Chinese participants) and did not include certain factors, such as gender and age. Males and females may use Instagram differently and engage in different social comparison behaviors. Instagram use may also vary by age group. The interviews were conducted among college students between the ages of 19 – 22. Responses from interviewees indicated that high school students and college students engaged in social comparison differently. For example,

when comparing with others, high school students cared more about the number of “likes” they got than college students did. Future research should consider other potential factors and assess the results across broader demographic samples.

In addition, the current study focused on social comparison on Instagram. The features of Instagram, such as suggesting friends and pictures may be factors that drive social comparison behaviors. Future research should replicate the present findings on other photo-sharing applications like Snapchat and Flickr to further investigate cultural similarities and differences of social comparison on photo-sharing applications.

### **Conclusion**

With narrative details, the current study investigated social comparison on Instagram and identified cultural similarities and differences of such behaviors. People from individualistic culture and collectivistic culture used Instagram differently and showed different tendencies of downward and upward comparison, which led to different impacts on their emotions and behaviors. Results suggest that researchers need to incorporate cultural perspective when running social comparison model. The present findings provide a starting point for additional research on social comparison on Instagram and other photo-sharing applications across a variety of contexts. It will help provide further insights into the impacts of photo-sharing applications on their users’ feelings, behaviors and well-being.

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## **Appendix**

### **Demographics**

- What is your gender?
- What is your age?
- Do you identify yourself as an American student?
- Do you identify yourself as a Chinese international student?

### **The motivations of social comparison**

- What motivates you to compare yourself with others on Instagram?

### **The processes of social comparison**

- In what ways do you compare yourself with others on Instagram?
- In what aspects do you compare yourself with others on Instagram?
- What pictures do you compare yourself with on Instagram?
- Who do you compare yourself with on Instagram?

### **The consequences of engaging in social comparison**

- How do you feel when you compare yourself with your friends on Instagram?
- How do you feel when you compare yourself with acquaintances on Instagram?
- How do you feel when you compare yourself with celebrities on Instagram?
  
- What do you think about your friends in comparison with you on Instagram?
- What do you think about acquaintances in comparison with you on Instagram?
- What do you think about celebrities in comparison with you on Instagram?
  
- What do you think about yourself in comparison with your friends on Instagram?
- What do you think about yourself in comparison with acquaintances on Instagram?
- What do you think about yourself in comparison with celebrities on Instagram?
  
- How comparing with your friends affects pictures you post on Instagram?
- How comparing with acquaintances affects pictures you post on Instagram?
- How comparing with celebrities affects pictures you post on Instagram?